

THE P.A.S.S.



TRANSCRIPT

Music...

[Female Voice] “There’s just too much information to cover in one year.”

[Male Voice] “Students seem to miss the big ideas as we move through the textbook.”

[Female Voice] “How can I make something like the Boxer Rebellion relevant to the everyday lives of my students?”

Music Ends....

[Joel] *“Welcome back, everyone, to Podcasts about Social Studies. In this edition, we are privileged to have Dr. H. Lynn Erickson with us who will address some of those earlier teacher concerns. Dr. Erickson is a life-long educator, an internationally known consultant, and a published author; but her heart and her passion can be found in concept based curriculum design. Without further delay, let’s join Fay Gore, one of our middle grades social studies consultants, as she speaks with Dr. Erickson about concept based curriculum and instruction.”*

[Fay] *“We’re here at the Department of Public Instruction with Dr. Lynn Erickson. She has just conducted a workshop and some observations of our training sessions here at DPI. Dr. Erickson, we’re delighted that you’re here with us and thank you for agreeing to do this podcast with us. First question – could you provide for us a brief overview of Concept Based Curriculum and Instruction?”*

[Lynn] “I actually coined the term concept based curriculum and instruction about 20 years ago when I was a curriculum director in a large district in Washington state. I noticed that students did not seem to be achieving as well as they should with our traditional topic based curriculum. It seemed like we just had students memorize facts and regurgitate information; and so, I started to study curriculum design. Over the past 20 years, I’ve really come to a deep understanding of how

we need to make a shift in our curriculum and instruction model. And basically, concept based curriculum says 'yes, we need to teach facts and yes we need to address topics in each of our disciplines' but there's a conceptual structure to every discipline that we have not paid much attention to in the past. So with a concept based curriculum and instructional model, we take our topics and our facts and draw out the most important concepts that we want students to understand at each grade level related to that content; and then we teach to conceptual ideas that will transfer through time. I call this a three dimensional curriculum model as opposed to a two dimensional which is a very low level coverage of information. A three dimensional model looks at three components: what do we want students to know factually, what do we want them to understand conceptually, and then what do we want them to be able to do as skills and processes. It's a little more sophisticated model for designing curriculum and instruction, but it definitely is going to develop the intellect of our students to higher levels. And, it's also going to motivate them for learning because we're engaging their personal minds, so that they are really interested in what they are learning and not just memorizing something because the teacher wants them to."

[Fay] *"Well, we've certainly embraced your model – the social studies section here at DPI – but as we go out and train teachers across the state, one of the questions that we get is: how is your model different from thematic teaching?"*

[Lynn] "That's a good question. The word thematic has different connotations. I do not use the word 'thematic' anymore because of all the confusion. Sometimes people teach dinosaurs and call it their theme and sometimes people teach a unit around perspectives and call it their theme; but one is topical and one is conceptual. So that is why I've totally changed the use of terminology and now I refer to everything as concept based units, which means there is always a conceptual level of work within whatever topic we are studying within that unit.

[Fay] *"When we think specifically about social studies and our social studies teachers and supervisors as well – they're listening to this podcast – and they want to know how can this instructional strategy be especially helpful for social studies teachers (given our strand of history which is more fact based) How can we benefit the social studies discipline?"*

[Lynn] "That's a wonderful question because, traditionally, we've looked at teaching history in this country as the facts we want students to learn; and when you look at state standards, they're always written in terms of what topics and what factual knowledge we should be teaching students. But, we are really missing a big point here because one of our major goals of history should be the development of historical thinking and reasoning related to the lessons of history. Well, the lessons of history are not found in the fact base. The lessons of history are found when you use the facts to extrapolate those big ideas of history that are going to transfer through time and across cultures. So, concept based

curriculum is so supportive of changing our model of history instruction to develop deeper understanding of the lessons of history that occur at the level where knowledge transfers. For example, if I am teaching about the American Revolution, I can teach a lot of facts about the American Revolution, but as a good history teacher that is concept based, I'm going to think to myself, 'I don't want them just to memorize facts about the American Revolution.' I want them to understand concepts like freedom, independence, and revolution; so that they can transfer the ideas they understand from those concepts through time and across cultures. This provides them a vehicle, then, for starting to think at a deeper level about other revolutions they are going to be studying when they go through a history curriculum at different grade levels. So, I think one of the best uses of concept based curriculum is to really elevate history teaching to a much higher level, and the other value it brings is that it gets students to think about history facts through the concepts and the conceptual level. You ask guiding questions that develop them to move from the facts to the 'so what' – the deeper lessons of history. You're giving students something to think about so they become personally engaged in it intellectually. You're developing their intellect at deeper levels but also motivating them because you are valuing their intellect as they think about these lessons of history in relation to specific facts. So, concept based curriculum and instruction is a huge help to history teachers – I think.

[Fay] *"That brings me to another point. You said something that really sparked my thinking in terms of concept based and applying that to social studies, and that is intellectual engagement. Unfortunately, when we look at social studies and poll students, they usually say that the social studies is often their least favorite subject area. How can we use Concept Based Instruction turn that opinion around and to get students excited about social studies again?"*

[Lynn] "I think it's because we don't want to think of history or social studies as being just a fact based discipline of facts to memorize. We want to think of it as an idea centered discipline; and so if we engage students with their thinking about ideas of history, then we then ask them to use their facts as a tool to support their ideas or lessons of history, then we are going to create more interest in that subject. The other thing that we find in history class is that a lot of times 11th grade history teachers complain 'Didn't those 8th grade teachers teach them anything? They've forgotten everything.'" So, I know in one state I work with, they do 6 weeks of review of everything they have forgotten from their 8th grade American history curriculum. So, I said you know something is wrong if we're having to spend 6 weeks to review everything they've forgotten. What I see as the missing element is if we go through teaching as if it is facts just to memorize and regurgitate, then it doesn't go into long term memory storage. The brain research says, if you just input information and you don't process it at a higher level, then it goes in one ear and out the other (so to speak), and they forget it soon after the test. If you want students to retain into long term memory the information you are teaching, then they have to process it through a higher level of thinking; and that's where concept based comes in because you ask them

questions and engage them in learning experiences that cause them to process the factual knowledge through the concepts and the conceptual levels of their brains. What we're developing and setting up with the concept based curriculum and instructional model, then, is synergistic thinking; so students not only study facts but think about them synergistically through the conceptual level of their minds. That's what is going to put information into long term memory storage, and it will do away with that 6 weeks review of the factual knowledge that they have forgotten."

[Fay] *"That's exciting! That's what makes me excited about engaging in concept based curriculum and instruction. When we think about the whole concept of high-stakes testing and accountability, we know that in North Carolina we have, at the high school level, two courses (Civics and Economics and US History) that are part of that high stakes testing. Students need both of those courses to graduate and they have to pass the End of Course test; so a lot of times at the high school level, what we get is what can we do to get the kids to pass the test and perform. So, do you see concept based curriculum and instruction as a way to help students perform better on the End of Course test?"*

[Lynn] "Yes. Absolutely. This is one of the areas that I find most difficult to convey to history teachers who are used to teaching in the traditional fact based way. If I can convince them that they can engage their students' intellect at a higher level as they work with the facts and that they are going to do better on tests, then I feel I can do cartwheels. It is a hard sell because they are so afraid if they spend any time on concepts and lessons of history at a deeper level they are not going to cover all the topics they've been mandated to teach throughout a year. The reality is that if we would do a good job teaching social studies from elementary through high school and build upon each others conceptual development of knowledge, we wouldn't have to keep repeating what they should have already learned in 5th grade history or at the different levels. Students would actually retain that information. I can guarantee you that if you put a concept based model in place, kids are going to score higher on standardized tests with factual knowledge than if they tried to memorize it – because they can't retain it all. And let's remember this for history teachers, 20 years from now, if you're an American History teacher, how are you going to teach contemporary American History? Because it is no longer just our nation for we are in a global context; and socially, politically, and economically, we are so complex and interdependent in a global situation that we can't teach it as small isolated facts. We have to be able to understand complex relationships, and the lessons of history are much more complex than they were at a time when we were more isolated as a nation.

[Fay] *"Point well taken – I think you've made our case. We don't have any additional questions for you, but do you have any closing remarks you would like to give?"*

[Lynn] "Thank you for inviting me and I want you to know this has been just the most

enjoyable day and I'd like to say two things. One, is that some people think concept based curriculum and instruction is only for the gifted students. It is not. It is for all students because we should value the intellect of each child. We may have to address them at different levels. For example, gifted students may be able to work with more complex concepts in relation to the content; but never short change children and think that they can't do this. You would be amazed at how brilliant all children are when you start to teach them and engage their conceptual level of thinking. I think one reason we have students looking so apathetic in many high school classes is we are not valuing their intellect. We are just asking them to memorize and regurgitate, and there is nothing in it for them intellectually; therefore, they are emotionally disengaged. Concept based curriculum emotionally engages all children and intellectually engages all children and it develops the mind. The final thing that I wanted to say is that I have been an educator for 40 years. For the last 20, I've been working with concept based curriculum and instruction; and for the last 13, traveling nationally and internationally training teachers on this model. I believe firmly that we are not going to improve education in the United States unless we change the curriculum and instruction model. It is outdated and low level for both teachers and students. This model is a little bit more sophisticated so it requires some training of teachers; but once a teacher understands concept based curriculum and instruction, they will never go back to teaching the way that they did because it is so much more powerful. And the benefits for both student and teacher are so much greater. So, I advocate that our entire country should change its curriculum and instructional model to concept based."

[Joel] *"Well, this concludes our second podcast. The music used during this episode is an original piece by J Underberg called 'Z,' and is licensed with 'Creative Commons.' This, and other, songs can be downloaded and used in your podcasts courtesy of www.podsafeaudio.com.*

Till next time, keep collaborating to change student lives."